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Soviet Hippies

by John Bushnell

In 1987 a faction of hippies calling themselves the Initiative Group of Hippies of Moscow, Kiev, Lvov and Other Cities of the USSR produced a brief account of the Soviet counterculture, "The Ideology of Soviet Hippies (1967-1987)."¹ The manuscript was a product of its times, evidence both of a hippie revival and of the politicization for which its authors appealed.

According to the Initiative Group, hippies had appeared in a number of cities in the late 1960s; by the early 1970s they had established links with each other, and a hippie community emerged. The Komsomol (the Young Communist League), the schools, and the forces of law and order persecuted but could not eradicate them. Those first hippies rejected the Soviet world, above all its prevailing morality and "Philistine approach to life." They strove to create in its stead a society based on equality, brotherhood, and love. Eventually that shining image was tarnished: pseudo-hippies corrupted the ideal of free love; drug use was mistakenly taken to be a token of freedom from social constraints; slogans such as "better to stick your nose into the mud than into politics" turned the movement toward passive withdrawal from society. But then after 1985, in the midst of the upheaval in Soviet society, the hippie movement revived.

Since 1985 hippies have indeed been much in evidence, especially at select cafes in Moscow, Leningrad and other cities. Their appearance — long hair, headbands, ragged jackets and worn blue jeans with English-language slogans embroidered on them, beads, often a guitar — is not as unusual as it once was. Far more distinctive is their behavior: travelling in small groups, they converge in the late afternoon at their favorite hangouts, forty, fifty or more at a time,

drink coffee, beg, scrounge table scraps, very occasionally exchange a few words, then depart for the apartments where they are encamped, only to repeat the routine the next day.

In "The Ideology of Soviet Hippies," the Initiative Group called on hippies to exchange this passivity for social engagement. The most urgent goal was to advance the cause of disarmament and eliminate the nuclear threat; to achieve trust between East and West, Soviet citizens must be given the right to visit the West without hindrance. The Initiative Group also asked that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights be observed and in particular that there be an unlimited right of free expression. The repressive apparatus must be curbed. Opposition groups, including the counterculture, should have a voice in the city soviets and take part in "the struggle for democratization."

For some hippies, demonstrative idleness is a message to the world, while others such as the Initiative Group certainly have been energized by the surrounding stir: they hold outdoor art and rock music fairs, produce *samizdat* anthologies of verse, and issue manifestos. But these are not distinctive activities. The program of the Initiative Group, just for example, resembles the goals of scores of new political groups that have no connection with the counterculture, and hippies share space with commercial artists at new outdoor markets in Moscow and Leningrad.²

Hippies have recently become visible, but they are not new to Soviet society: the single most interesting thing about them is that they have a history. The central historical question is how hippies managed to survive for well over two decades, the better part of that time under conditions that — one might have supposed — should have precluded their

1 "Ideologiya sovetskikh khippi (1967-1987)," *Den za den*, No. 7, July 1987, in *Materialy samizdata*, Arkhiv samizdata (henceforth "AS"), No. 6114.

2 I observed this hippie routine myself in fall 1988. The most thorough published description of hippie behavior is by M. Rozin, "Psikhologiya moskovskikh khippi," *Psikhologicheskie problemy izucheniya neformalnykh molodezhnykh obedinenii*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 44-69. See also A. P. Fain, "Lyudi 'sistemy'," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1989 No. 1, pp. 85-92; A. Beletskaya, "Pustynia, okazyvaetsia, byvaet v dushe cheloveka," *Komsomolskoe znanie*, Dec. 6, 1986; Yulia Troll, "Pismo moskovskikh khippi," *Novoe russkoe slovo*, May 13, 1987; *Vesti iz SSSR*, No. 18, Sept. 30, 1985; Linda Feldman, "Laid-Back in the U.S.S.R.," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 24, 1987.



existence. Indeed, they have outlasted their Western progenitors; their endurance makes them unique. In some respects Soviet hippies are a relic from a bygone era, in their ideas no less than in their appearance. They still cling, for instance, to the original narrow meaning of counterculture as the hippie community, and the term will be used in that old-fashioned sense here. In other respects, however, Soviet hippies had to assume novel characteristics adapted to the special features of their environment. The parent culture produced a distinctly Soviet counterculture.

Origins of the Counterculture

The Initiative Group's designation of 1967 as Year One of the Soviet hippy movement was arbitrary, but everyone who claims to know locates the beginnings around that time. And not just in Moscow and Leningrad. As early as October 1968 the newspaper *Sovetskaia Latvia* reported that hippies were parading around Riga and offending the public with their long hair, multicolored trousers, flowers, beads, and bells. According to Vladislav Akhromenko, the first hippies appeared in Minsk in the late 1960s. Like the Initiative Group, Akhromenko claims that the first Soviet hippies tried to create a new culture distinct from the discredited official lies. He also claims, more concretely, that rock music was at the center of the hippies' alternative culture, and on this point, too, there is general assent.³

Rock music has expressed opposition to social conventions everywhere, but it has been far more subversive in the USSR than in the West. Because of its foreign origins, foreign totems, and foreign language, rock and roll stood the verities of official mass culture on their head. Because those verities were entangled in the reigning ideology, they were staunchly defended. That was why Soviet cultural authorities attempted to embargo, ignore, denature or otherwise contain rock music. By resisting rock, they emphasized and amplified all of its subversive attributes. Although enormously popular and the object of considerable unofficial (and lately official) commerce, rock has never lost its oppositional meaning and has been an important element in the Soviet counterculture from its origins up to the present day.⁴

Just as important as the cultural challenge that rock represented were the social implications of performance. After a decade of listening to the music, in the second half of the 1960s Soviet adolescents formed rock and roll bands in large numbers. They scrounged instruments, built rudi-

mentary equipment, and copied — down to the English-language lyrics — the songs they heard on shortwave radio and bootlegged records. Many of the bands played at legitimate clubs and restaurants whose managers needed to draw customers, but they nevertheless had taken a big step outside the official structures that were supposed to cater to and control young people's leisure activities. Moreover, the bands knew that most of the official and adult world disapproved of them. They were laying the foundations for an independent youth culture, and some of those involved conceived of their activities in just that liberationist way. Indeed, there always has been considerable overlap between the community of rock musicians and the counterculture.

The excitement that Soviet youngsters felt about rock music was part of a 1960s experience that in some ways resembled the conditions that nourished the counterculture in the West. Teenagers had come of age in a post-war, post-Stalin world. The grosser forms of repression had vanished, and so had the fear and paralyzing caution that had hobbled their parents. A substantial dissident movement for a few years baffled the government's efforts to prevent public political opposition, and put a mass of samizdat tracts into private circulation. Bulat Okudzhava, Aleksandr Galich, Vladimir Vysotskiy and scores of other bards expressed the younger generation's longing for a less restrictive social world and ridiculed official shibboleths. The standard of living rose dramatically, and by the late 1960s hundreds of thousands of teens had the money to buy the tape recorders and black market records that were staples in an emerging consumer culture. Judging from the fragmentary information on the social origins of the first hippies, they came from the better-educated and privileged strata that had benefitted most from the social and political changes.

Soviet society of the late 1960s remained barren and repressive by Western standards, but by contrast with its own recent past it was prosperous and vibrant. So rapid a transformation produced considerable strain in the body social: the sensibilities of generations with radically different formative experiences conflicted sharply. Many adolescents must have found the way their parents lived dishonest and demeaning — and, much worse, unnecessarily so. They did not therefore plunge into the counterculture en masse, but they constituted a population from which a smaller band of hippies might be expected to emerge.

And so in the late 1960s Soviet youngsters who called themselves hippies, who looked like hippies, and who claimed to reject the world their parents had made, began to

3 A. Parshin, "Deadbeats," *Sovetskaya Latvia*, Oct. 8, 1968 (translated in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Nov. 13, 1968); Vladislav Akhromenko, "Neskolko neizvestnykh glav otechestvennogo roka," *Rodnik* [Minsk], 1988 No. 11, pp. 16-9; V. A. Danchenko, "Kontrkultura: karat ili milovat?," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1988 No. 2, pp. 140-2; Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia*, Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 30-1; Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 112-3.

4 On Soviet rock, see Troitsky, *op. cit.*; Ryback, *op. cit.*; S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union 1917-1980*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 292-315; Terry Bright, "The Soviet Crusade Against Pop," *Popular Music*, V. 5, 1985, pp. 123-48; and Paul Easton, "The Rock Music Community," in Jim Riordan, ed., *Soviet Youth Culture*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989, pp. 45-82.

wander about the Soviet Union. Artemy Troitsky, now one of the Soviet Union's leading rock critics, recalls of the early 1970s:

During the warm months tens of thousands of longhairs gathered in the Crimea, making it something of a Soviet California. In Yalta there was a large market where hippies bought and sold clothing, records and all sorts of things, and earned enough money to get by on a bare minimum. The warm climate and the abundance of temporary 'communes' solved the problem of finding a roof over one's head.⁵

Most of those thousands can have been hippies for a season only, and Troitsky is the only witness who recalls such great throngs. Rather quickly, it would seem, the numbers shrank. Nevertheless, the first wave marked out the paths of seasonal migration that smaller bands of hippies subsequently followed.

The Counterculture *Sistema*

By the early 1970s, hippies committed to living permanently outside officially approved social networks had, by dint of persistence, become a community with its own tiny place in the social landscape. They registered their presence in various ways. For instance, on June 1, 1971 (International Children's Day), about 150 hippies gathered at the downtown campus of Moscow University to hold an anti-war protest march to the American Embassy with banners proclaiming, in English, "Make love, not war!" Police hauled them to police stations, shaved the hairiest, and sent some off to compulsory psychiatric hospitalization.⁶ That demonstration became a favorite counterculture legend: within a few years, hippies were relating to the occasional Western interlocutor that thousands had taken part, and that hundreds had been sent to mental institutions as a result.⁷

The counterculture developed its own language, too. Vladimir Kozlovskiy discovered a specifically hippie slang when he set out to collect gay slang in Moscow in 1973. Only a more or less distinct group can generate and sustain a distinct language, and the slang in turn probably helped to fence the group off from outsiders. Unfortunately, Kozlovskiy provides neither details nor examples, so we cannot know how well developed or specialized the slang was when he stumbled across it. But it must have incorporated a good deal of English (the 1971 banner exemplified the importance of English to hippies) and was probably well

advanced toward the argot the counterculture subsequently employed.⁸

Also by the early 1970s, an inter-city network of hangouts and crash pads had taken shape, and it gave both structure and a name to the counterculture: hippies referred to their way stations as "the system" (*sistema*), and then "the system" became their name for all those people who frequented the network. The crash pads were known as *flety*, from the British "flat." By *flet* hippies meant not just any apartment, but one that they were currently occupying for some extended period: because it had been abandoned, or because the legal tenant had put it at their disposal. They called daytime hangouts *tusovki*, which latter-day hippies derive from the verb "to shuffle" (*tasovat*). Indeed, hippies did shuffle and reshuffle themselves at the *tusovki*: they arrived from a *flet* with one group, hung around for a few hours, then might depart with a different group for a different *flet*, or a different city. Groups and individuals circulated slowly through a nationwide system.

Usually hippies travelled in small, impermanent bands rather than as individuals, and these bands also came to be known as *tusovki*. In November 1978 Andrea Lee ran into one such band, led by nineteen-year old Misha. He had left his home in Orenburg at age eighteen because life was boring and his parents could not understand why he wanted to be a hippie, had wandered around Central Asia, the Baltic, and the Black Sea coast with a group of friends, and now led his own group. In Moscow, Misha's group hung out at the Café Aromat, which they called Vavilon (Babylon). Despite the fact that the management frequently summoned the police to drive them out, the cafe had been a hippie watering hole for years. When Lee met Misha and his band they were camping out in an apartment belonging to a young artist, but were about to depart for the warmer climes of Kiev and (so they said) Samarkand.⁹

Misha's group may have been unusually nomadic, but journeying was then and has remained a key feature of the hippie existence. The south was popular, especially during winter. The Baltic region was a particularly popular summer destination, because the authorities were more tolerant there than in the Russian heartland, and because of the outdoor rock festivals that became regular events in the Baltic republics during the 1970s. Hippies converged on Tallinn every year to celebrate May Day, while the Riga hippie Mikhail Bombin, beginning in 1978, organized an annual summer encampment on the Gauja River. Hippies travelled to other

5 Troitsky, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

6 *A Chronicle of Current Events*, Issues Nos. 19 and 20, London, 1971, pp. 252-3.

7 "The 'Hair Group'," *Newsweek*, Dec. 8, 1975, p. 14; Sylvia Rothchild, *A Special Legacy: An Oral History of Soviet Jewish Emigres in the United States*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, p. 312.

8 V. Kozlovskiy, *Argo russkoi gomoseksualnoi subkultury: Materialy k izucheniiu*, Benson, VT: Chalidze Publications, 1986, p. 37. On Anglicisms in hippie slang and slogans during the 1970s, see Troitsky, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Andrea Lee, *Russian Journal*, New York: Random House, 1981, pp. 90-91; *Newsweek*, Dec. 8, 1975.

9 Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-95; *Newsweek*, Dec. 8, 1975.

rock festivals and other destinations as occasion warranted. Misha's band, for instance, went to Leningrad in 1978 for a July 4 rock concert at which Joan Baez, Santana, and the Beach Boys were to have been the featured acts but which never transpired. From there they moved on to Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Polyana to celebrate the writer's 150th anniversary. The 200 or so hippies who showed up were stopped at the gates and camped in the woods for two days.¹⁰

Although they lived rootless, irregular lives, sustenance proved not much more of a problem for young hippies than finding shelter. Misha's group lived by panhandling, others hired themselves out by the day as artists' models or for other odd jobs. Some — if we may extrapolate backwards from the 1980s — accepted money from their parents, but were reluctant to admit it because they conceived of themselves as in conflict with the parental world. Hippies lived lives of wandering asceticism, but that was partly a matter of choice.

In the late 1960s probably all Soviet hippies were in their teens or very early twenties, but during the 1970s those who remained became perforce the counterculture's senior citizens. By the middle of the decade some of the older hippies for whom the rigors of itinerant indigence no longer held any appeal had begun to settle down and work at jobs that paid little but afforded housing and freedom from supervision: tending furnaces, cleaning courtyards and sidewalks, working as night watchmen. These were jobs that were particularly difficult to fill in big cities like Moscow and Leningrad, where a growing shortage of unskilled labor collided with severe restrictions on in-migration. Desperate managers hired almost anyone, no questions asked.

Ecology of the *Sistema*

The counterculture thus put down roots within the very society it pictured itself as being outside of and in opposition to. That was true not only of the slowly aging hippies who found a niche within the official economy. Even the most economically parasitical bands depended upon odd jobs, the vacant apartments (no matter how shabby) that were increasingly easy to find as the housing crisis eased, the cafeterias and cafes where space was available for hours of lounging, the long distance trucks that provided free transportation from city to city, and money from parents and other adults. The economic development of the post-Stalin decades provided the margin of prosperity needed to make the counterculture's sustained existence possible. The counterculture found shelter, literally and metaphorically, within the nooks and crannies of Soviet society.

The counterculture needed not just an adequate material base, it also required a certain amount of tolerance for public

non-conformity. That condition, too, was met by the 1960s, but just barely. Hippies were constantly victimized, by street toughs who beat them up with impunity and by the police who beat them and then sent them off for brief stints in mental hospitals. No doubt many Soviet police and jurists really did think the youngsters mentally unbalanced. For their part, the hippies found their psychiatric incarceration extremely unpleasant, but useful: once labelled psychologically abnormal they could avoid conscription. But the result of the hostility and harassment they faced was that they had perforce to lead a relatively reclusive existence, for the most part keeping to their *tusovki* and *flety* and out of the public eye. Once the hippies' first flowering had passed and they had retreated into their *sistema*, the public at large was unaware of their existence.

In fact, the structure of the Soviet counterculture was fitted to the conditions in which it emerged. The *tusovki* and *flety* were the way Soviet hippies provided space for themselves; they were the functional equivalent of the rural communes that American hippies formed to solve their own need to escape the hostility of urban authorities. The Soviet police suppressed whatever communes Soviet hippies attempted to establish.¹¹ The counterculture could exploit existing niches within Soviet institutions, but died of exposure when it ventured into the open.

The unstable bands and the perpetual wandering through the counterculture network were also natural responses to environmental pressures. Hippies prized lack of constraint, but could solve their subsistence problems only in groups. They surely experienced tremendous claustrophobia within the small space where they were tolerated, and a compensating urge to change location. Of course there were other reasons — both psychological and ideological — for the endless shuffling and circulation of the hippie bands, but the way the *sistema* operated was an ecological adaptation to the possibilities open to the counterculture within Soviet society.

Diversification of the Counterculture

Although the *sistema* — the *tusovki*, *flety*, and migratory bands — has persisted to the present day, the counterculture experienced a crisis and acquired new behavioral options at the end of the 1970s. Drug use and addiction became more widespread, harder drugs came into use, and there were deaths from overdoses. Partly as a reaction to that development, some members of the *sistema* moved from the mystical beliefs to which hippies inclined and toward established religion. Others, under the direct impression of the European anti-nuclear movement of the late 1970s and then

¹⁰ Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 92, 98. On the abortive Leningrad rock festival, see *A Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 51, London: Amnesty International Publications, 1979, p. 189; and Barney Cohen, "R & R in the USSR," *Saturday Review*, June 23, 1980.

¹¹ Andrei Okulov, "Nastroeniya molodezhnoi oppozitsii," *Posev*, 1981 No. 1, p. 11. The "communes" to which Troitsky, *op. cit.*, p. 4, refers were in fact probably *tusovki*.

of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, added political to cultural opposition and began to call themselves pacifists or hippie-pacifists. Some combined religion and pacifism, as for instance Mikhail Bombin of Riga, who became an active member of the Orthodox Church and styled the annual hippie camp on the Gauja as a peace encampment. As Bombin's example demonstrates, it was entirely possible to be Orthodox, a pacifist, and still a part of the counterculture system.¹²

The pacifists were a particularly interesting off-shoot of the counterculture because they built a bridge to the political dissident movement. Pacifist sentiments had long been a part of the hippie ethos, and posed a direct challenge to militant official patriotism. Like rock music, pacifism has much stronger countercultural connotations in the Soviet Union than in the West. Pacifist groups of countercultural origin existed in both Leningrad and Moscow by at least 1980 (producing antinuclear and antiwar graffiti as evidence of their presence), and thereafter in other cities, too. In fact, an intercity network of pacifist way stations superimposed on the original counterculture network seems to have developed in the early 1980s. There are stories of pacifist conclaves with strong countercultural features — easy sex and plenty of marijuana — even in such unlikely places as Ufa in the Urals. After Bombin was arrested in 1984 for spreading his antiwar message among soldiers he met on a train, the police conducted interrogations in connection with his case in Riga, Lvov, Leningrad, Ufa, and perhaps in Moscow and other cities. Bombin, at least, maintained a far-flung network of contacts and was a frequent traveller.¹³

Unlike their more apolitical brethren, the hippie pacifists organized demonstrations. Beginning in December 1980, shortly after John Lennon's murder, they held annual memorial meetings on the Lenin Hills, overlooking Moscow. When police hauled them off to the precinct house in 1981, they scrawled slogans on the walls, among them "Lennon lived, Lennon lives, Lennon will live," a pun on the familiar Soviet inspirational slogan featuring Lenin.¹⁴ In 1983 and 1984, two counterculture pacifist groups in Moscow, Free Initiative (*Svobodnaya initsiativa*) and Good Will (*Dobraya volia*) held antiwar demonstrations with several hundred participants.¹⁵ Intellectuals in 1982 set up a very

different kind of peace organization, the Moscow Trust Group, which was part of the dissident mainstream. But the Trust Group, too, had connections to the counterculture. Sergei Batovrin, an artist and one of its founders, had moved through the *sistema* for several years during the 1970s, and Mikhail Bombin was a signatory of the Trust Group's program. Moreover, Soviet hippies tried to use the Trust Group as a bridge to the Western counterculture once they learned that Western peace activists were coming to Moscow to show support for the group.¹⁶

At about the same time that the pacifists began to diverge from traditional hippies, the counterculture attracted the attention of the youth subculture that began to emerge in the late 1970s: the sometimes overlapping gangs of soccer fans (*fanaty*), heavy metal music enthusiasts (who acquired structure and a name, *metallisty*, only around 1985), and especially punks. Their origins had nothing to do with the existing hippie counterculture. They were far more violent, aggressive, and numerous than the hippies, and at the same time less isolated: they lived at home, some went to school, and they did not wander about the country the way hippies did. Yet the subcultural groups had much in common with the hippies, too. They hung out on the fringes, often in proximity to hippie *tusovki*. They all, even the fan gangs, expressed the same countercultural rejection of Soviet values as the hippies: they violated behavioral and stylistic conventions and had Western idols. They were the first to use graffiti to broadcast their views, and employed a graffiti grammar that expressed contempt for things Soviet: they used Russian only for abuse, English to confer honor.¹⁷

Given the proximity of their attitudes, interaction was inevitable. Punks, who went to the greatest lengths to offend convention, needed both safety and an audience: the hippies' *tusovki* provided a suitable venue. *Metallisty* had their own assembly points, but they found the counterculture network a convenient and interesting place to gather. So, too, did the *breikery* (break dancers) and *skeithbordisty* (skateboarders) who formed their own small groups. By the second half of the 1980s, all the countercultural and subcultural groups shared *tusovki* in outlying parts of Moscow and Leningrad, and individuals crossed over from one group to another.¹⁸ If

12 I am indebted to Nikolai Khramov, Aleksandr Rubchenko, and Sergei Klubov, whom I interviewed in 1988, for information on the condition of the counterculture around 1980. And see Nikolai Khramov, "Is it Easy to be Truthful? Reflections in a Movie Theater," *Across Frontiers*, V. 4 No. 1, Winter 1988; and Presman, "Eshche raz o khippi," pp. 113-4.

13 A number of people told me in 1984 about the pacifist network and gatherings, including one in Ufa. On Bombin, see the documents in *Materialy samizdata*, AS No. 5797, No. 5798, and 5801; and *Vesti iz SSSR*, No. 5-6, March 31, 1986.

14 SMOT, *Informatsionnyi biulleten*, No. 25, Dec. 1981, in *Materialy samizdata*, AS No. 4711 (an editorial note provides the AP report on the December 1980 demonstration); *Vesti iz SSSR*, No. 5, March 15, 1983; No. 23-24, Dec. 31, 1985; *USSR News Brief*, No. 23-24, Dec. 31, 1983; Lyudmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1985, p. 392; and Nikolai Khramov, a participant in some of the demonstrations, September 1988 interview.

15 *Vesti iz SSSR*, No. 7, April 15, 1983; No. 17, Sept. 15, 1983; No. 11, June 15, 1984; No. 22-23, Dec. 15, 1986; Latvian Information Bulletin, July 1984; interview with Nikolai Khramov, a member of Free Initiative, September 1988.

16 Joshua Rubenstein, *Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights*, revised edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, pp. 275-88; Alexeyeva, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-8; Olga Medvedkova [a Trust Group founder], "The Moscow Trust Group: An Uncontrolled Grass-Roots Movement in the Soviet Union," Mershon Center, *Quarterly Report*, V. 12, No. 4, Spring 1988; Nikolai Khramov, interviews, September 1988.

17 I deal at length with the youth subculture and its graffiti in *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture*, Boston: Unwin and Hyman, 1990.

18 For discussion, see A. P. Fain, "Spetsifika neformalnykh podrostkovykh obedinenii v krupnykh gorodakh," *Psikhologicheskie problemy izucheniya neformalnykh molodezhnykh obedinenii*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 23-43.

subcultural groups shared the hippies' *tusovki*, hippies picked up the subcultural habit of writing graffiti, and used the same culturally-charged graffiti grammar. At the end of the decade, the counterculture had evolved into a web of groups, with the *sistema* proper — the hippies — at the center, and more or less closely related groups orbiting around or intersecting it.

The Strains of Growth

Unprecedented social permissiveness under Gorbachev has facilitated the growth of the counterculture in several ways. Police and psychiatric persecution has abated, allowing the counterculture to emerge from its refuges as it had not since the *sistema* first took shape. Visibility has enhanced the hippies' notoriety, which has proved to be a magnet for many teenagers. And in the absence of harassment, the rate of attrition has declined. Hippies conducted a census of the Moscow *sistema* in 1987 and reportedly found two thousand members, but given their transience and the difficulty of defining who belongs to the *sistema* and who does not, that figure should probably be taken to mean only that in 1987 there were many of them. Certainly the number of hippies on display at *tusovki* in Moscow and Leningrad in the fall of 1988 was impressive: at cafes they spilled out onto the streets and sidewalks, at parks they took over all the benches.

Older hippies complain that many new recruits join for the wrong reasons: sex and drugs. The counterculture's reputation for drug use, deserved or not, does indeed attract teenagers. A conversation of several hours with young members of the *sistema* at a Moscow *tusovka* turned repeatedly to drugs: the varieties used, the readily available medications that can be used to produce a high, the frequency and pleasures of doing so. One hippie group is reported to have severed its ties with the *sistema* out of disgust with this preoccupation with drugs, while the entire older generation is said to be keeping its distance from the new converts.¹⁹

The ferment in society at large also causes divisions within the counterculture. Many veterans of the pre-Gorbachev years adhere faithfully to the traditional routine — *tusovka*, *flet*, transience — but younger hippies tend to be socially engaged. Some of them declare they are not hippies at all, but beatniks; to them "hippie" stands for passivity, while beatniks (or "the beat army") connotes cultural creativity. Others, among them the Initiative Group, continue to call themselves hippies and to honor what they think of as the original hippie ideals, but have adopted a forthrightly political agenda. Many of the pacifist hippies who in the early 1980's remained within the counterculture have in the meantime moved almost entirely into the busy

world of grassroots politics and retain little more than a sentimental attachment to the *sistema*.

The *sistema*, like the Soviet system itself, has been shaken by the changes Gorbachev unleashed. When the counterculture emerged from the burrows and runways to which it had for years been confined, it spread out in several different directions. The surrounding environment is so different from what it was in decades past that the traditional *sistema* seems out of touch with the times. Were a counterculture to be created from scratch today, it would certainly not center on the meander through cafes and flats. In the long run, the variety of social and cultural options now available will probably do more to undermine the old hippie world than police harassment ever did. Yet even as other culturally oppositional styles have become available the *sistema* has endured and in some respects gained strength, because the new recruits and new styles arrange themselves around the counterculture that is already in place.

Counterculture Values

What the first Soviet hippies thought they were doing is at this distance unknowable; if any documents or statements from the early years of the counterculture still exist, they have not come to light. According to the fragmentary reports from and recollections of the early years, hippies stood for love, peace, brotherhood, and an end to social distinctions, and dabbled in various Eastern and Christian mysticisms, in Tolstoyanism, and later in John Lennonism. They borrowed those ideas rather than developing them through a systematic critique of their own society, but of course it was easy enough to make the connection.

Perhaps the earliest extant hippie statement of principles, "No Way Back" (*Nazad puti net*), derives from the pacifist wing of the hippie movement and is not representative of the entire counterculture. It was widely distributed by the hippie pacifist group Free Initiative in 1986, but dates from around 1980.²⁰ "No Way Back" proclaimed: "We are the lawful children of the hope of the sick present. We are the new Faith and the new Life. The impossibility, the self-destructiveness of the old, decrepit ideals compels us to live in a new way." The proclamation condemned science that destroys the world, the industrial cancer consuming the planet, the totalitarian state that reduces humanity to cattle, and the Philistinism that cannot tolerate free individuality. Among the remedies that Free Initiative prescribed were refusal to be complicit in the evil of the old, and harmony with nature. It also argued that isolation from society was necessary for self-knowledge but also destructive, and that hippies must return and heal humanity.

19 A. M. Presman, "Eshche raz o khippi," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 1988 No. 4, pp. 113-4.

20 Published in *Den za den*, No. 9, 10 Sept. 1987, which is available in *Materialy samizdata*, AS, no. 6122. I have a typewritten text, dating from 1987 or 1988, which has a notation that the copy from which this was made had "1980" pencilled in at the bottom.

Not only did "No Way Back" present the views of only one wing of the hippie movement, it was also unrepresentatively articulate. Mark Rozin, who in 1988 published a detailed ethnographic and psychological account of the Moscow *sistema*, found that the hippies with whom he associated — and these included a few veterans approaching middle age — did not discuss their ideas systematically, but mostly told stories to each other. From those stories Rozin deduced that their central values were freedom, in particular inner freedom; love, as in "God is love, love is the unity of people, a hippie is one who furthers the unity of people, who loves" (from a hippie manifesto of 1987); non-violence; a higher reality, achieved through meditation, art, and (sometimes) narcotics; above all, harmony with nature. Hippies expressed these values in the way they explained such things as their long hair. Rozin discovered three different stories about that: long hair is natural, not artificially tamed by scissors; Christ had long hair and a beard, and therefore so must hippies; long hair functions as antennae that pick up emanations from cosmic reason, or God.²¹

Rozin also found considerable congruence between stories and behavior. Hippies express both deliberate passivity and spontaneous unpredictability in gesture and action. Im-mobility, he concluded, is the characteristic pose at their *tusovki*, slow motion their pace when on the move. They tell stories about the hippie who did not stir from his *flet* for weeks. They pay no attention to keeping appointments, and are given to sudden and unplanned journeys; a tale about a hippie who set off to the store for bread and wound up in Odessa is among their favorites. As hippies see it, their behavior embodies indifference to society, harmony with nature, and untrammelled freedom.²² But it must be said that Rozin seems to have gathered stories mostly from the traditionalists who continue to cultivate deliberate withdrawal from society.

The poems and songs hippies compose stress the same core values.²³ Solmi writes, in "Sweet Freedom" (*Sladkaya svoboda*):

Look quickly:
There I go
Where I should
Where I want!
I'M FREE!
Pass me if you want,
You're no concern of mine.
I'll be at the finish
At the proper time.

Papa Lyosha writes, in "Trolley without a Conductor" (*Trolleybus bez kontrolera*):

I'm in the trolley without a conductor
I'm in the trolley without
I'm unconducted
Who cares about the ticket check?
I'm free to do what I want
I can shoulder that cross
I'm satisfied
I've left behind
Surveillance, disgrace.

The hippie rejection of the conventions of Soviet society, made explicit in their verse, is implicit in their language.²⁴ Hippie slang is so thoroughly anglicized that, in the Soviet context, it amounts to an argot impenetrable to ordinary Russians. Hippie poets employ the argot freely in their verse. In another fragment from Papa Lyosha, the words in English in the original are italicized: "After the *night*/the *people* got high/everything's completely *right*/We'll *skip* to Peter." Of course, English words in counterculture argot do not have quite their English meaning, since they refer to specific features of the Soviet hippie life. Often entire broken English phrases are incorporated into their songs: "We shall dancing boogie-woogie every day...We shall drinking Coca-Cola every day." They transform English words and phrases into hippie argot not to be incomprehensible, although that is an important effect, but to express their contempt for the Russian culture around them. They have deliberately inverted official values, which for so long held everything Soviet to be superior to everything Western. In the hippie world, what is important is given a Western label.

Sistema and System

Investigation of the Soviet counterculture is at the same time investigation of Soviet society. The counterculture defies conventions, but exists only by exploiting possibilities inherent in the society from which it has emerged. Thus we learn that during the 1960s the Soviet Union became sufficiently prosperous, diverse, and tolerant — barely — to host a counterculture that defied official and popular values and circumvented all of the institutional controls that the Soviet regime counted on to channel behavior. That remained the case even during the bleak 1970s. The conditions favorable to the survival of a counterculture had little to do with high politics; society lumbered onward according to its own logic, ignoring those who thought they held the reins. On the other hand, the structure of the *sistema* reflected the fact that Soviet society afforded the counterculture little space. Confined to their *tusovki* and *flety*, the hippies made a virtue of the passivity to which they were condemned.

21 M. Rozin, "Psikhologiya moskovskikh khippi," pp. 48-55.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-69. I observed the same behavior and heard many of the same stories at hippie *tusovki* in the fall of 1988.

23 I quote from texts in my possession collected from hippies by A. Mazurova in 1987-1988. On Solmi, see Feldman, "Laid-Back."

24 For discussion and lexicon, see A. I. Mazurova, "Slovar slenga, rasprostranennogo v sredi neformalnykh molodezhnykh obedinenii," *Psikhologicheskie problemy izucheniia neformalnykh molodezhnykh obedinenii*, Moscow, 1988, pp. 148-157. Hippie informants compiled a similar lexicon for me.

Studying the counterculture not only allows us to see the finer texture of Soviet society, it also helps us appreciate that Soviet society — like any other — has always been endowed with history. Reflections on the Soviet Union often presume that stasis has been the norm, and that change (or decomposition) has just begun. In reality, the ground has always been shifting. Probably the fluctuations in the counterculture, which is very small, exaggerate the underlying movement in society, which is very large. Nevertheless, the counterculture does provide a trace for the larger history. And a dynamic history the counterculture has had: an effervescent formative stage, then establishment of the *sistema* and withdrawal from public view, then the growth of the pacifist wing and interaction with new subcultural groups like the punks. All of those developments, through which the counterculture adjusted to its constantly changing environment, preceded Gorbachev's advent to power. Gorbachev may have changed the direction in which Soviet society was moving, but he can hardly be credited with imparting movement itself.

Not surprisingly, culture and counterculture experienced similar crises in the late 1970s. The malfunctioning of official institutions at the end of the 1970s had a parallel in the growing drug use and declining sense of purpose among hippies. The official system had become so ossified that it could no longer accommodate social and economic growth, and a similar inflexibility beset the *sistema*. Indeed, the counterculture encapsulates the whole story of the crisis in Soviet society: it owed its existence to socio-economic change, its structure to the regime's reluctance to tolerate an autonomous public sphere, its decay to claustrophobia.

The counterculture not only offers a useful window onto recent history, it has also acted on the larger society. For instance, it helped to lend shape to the network of subcultural groups in the pre-Gorbachev years, and it has continued to provide a foundation for them and many of the other unofficial groups that have emerged since 1985. The *sistema* has

served this function because it was well established at the time other groups formed, and provided a natural haven and model. The counterculture's lengthy history also conferred moral authority on the hippies. Thus hippies play a more prominent part in the unofficial social and cultural life of Soviet society — in the counterculture in a broader sense — than their numbers alone would warrant.

Moreover, veterans of the *sistema* can be found in many of the most dynamic unofficial groups in Soviet society. Former hippie pacifists remain politically active, in the Trust Group and in the Democratic Union. Many hippies have followed their interest in Eastern religions into the burgeoning Hare Krishna movement. The Leningrad counterculture not only helped to sustain a vital community of rock musicians, it also spawned an experimental film movement. Hippies have always been energetic producers of poetry, song, and art, and have made a substantial contribution to the recent proliferation of cultural ventures. The counterculture deserves some credit for sustaining the potential for creative individuality during the years when that quality was so hard to find elsewhere, and thus for facilitating the vibrant cultural life that has emerged under Gorbachev.

For all that, the hippie *sistema* is today an anachronism, a relic from the years when the possibilities for public display and activity were far more limited than now. Pacifists in and out of the counterculture search for practical steps to achieve peace on Earth; writers, artists, and musicians try to make good on the promise of an alternative culture; even the punks and *metallists* at the fringes of the counterculture defy convention far more actively than the sedate hippies at their cafés. Yet the endurance of the *sistema* reminds us that much of Soviet society consists of relics from the past, and that those relics retain a powerful hold on Soviet imaginations.

John Bushnell is Associate Professor of History at Northwestern University and the author of Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture (Unwin and Hyman, 1990).

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